

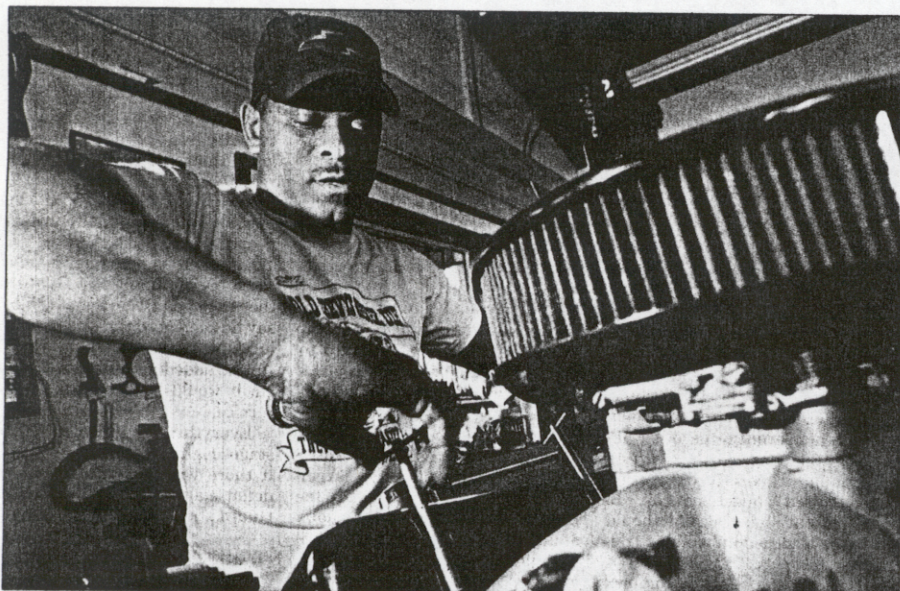
## CALL US

LIFELINES WELCOMES  
YOUR QUESTIONS  
AND SUGGESTIONS.  
SEND E-MAIL TO  
FEATURES@ATPCO.COM.  
CALL US AT (703) 750-8125  
OR (800) 424-9335, EXT. 8125.

# Lifelines



THE SAVVY  
INVESTOR  
THRIFT SAVINGS  
IS HERE  
32



Marine Staff Sgt. Joseph Douglas tools around with his 650-horsepower Camaro engine at the Midwest Auto Body repair shop in Carlsbad, Calif. Douglas builds his own cars and engines for street drag racing in Southern California.

SANDY HUFFAKER

By Dan Owen  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

## Things you auto know

Car shops help  
with basics,  
fancy add-ons

**F**or many drivers, vehicles are more than just transportation. Whether it's a sports car, sport-utility vehicle, off-road ground pounder or the family van, an automobile is a hobby, too.

It's the focus of time, talent and money that sets the car apart from what's driven off the showroom floor.

However, do-it-yourself aftermarket projects aren't as easy as they used to be. Opening the hood reveals an unbelievably cramped engine compartment, filled with a variety of computerized "black boxes," all enclosed or hidden under various covers.

It's a baffling sight, even for the most experienced shade-tree mechanics. Long gone are the days of working on cars with a set of wrenches and a feeler gauge.

Even so, active-duty military auto enthusiasts are installing everything from tires to turbochargers. Here's what some military people and the civilian managers of base auto-skills and hobby centers say is hot and not:

Falling out of favor are the various fuel-system additives, octane boosters and so-called miracle oils.

"We don't see much of that here," says Tom Trigg, manager of two auto-hobby centers at Camp Pendleton, Calif. "I think most people realize that modern gasoline as it comes from the pump and today's motor oils, especially the synthetic oils, are more than adequate."

The vast majority — 95 percent

Below, Army 1st Lt. John Gowel of Fort Carson, Colo., stands next to his 1996 Ford Explorer. He tends to the basics of the machine regularly: oil, filters and shocks.



GAYLON WAMPLER

— of today's cars are designed to run best on the lowest octane gasoline (typically 87 octane) sold at the pump.

Trigg's opinion is supported by Army 1st Lt. John Gowel of Fort Carson, Colo. "I just do routine maintenance on my '96 Ford Explorer — oil and filters, shock absorbers, brakes and rotors. Our hobby shop sells all the basic filters, oils, solvents and cleaners for this type of work."

However, he adds, "Last year, I installed a CD player to augment the factory sound system."

In fact, upgraded sound systems top the list of "what's hot" in the auto aftermarket on military bases across the country. Next are performance tires and custom wheels.

Air Force Master Sgt. Charles Howard of Travis Air Force Base, Calif., explains: "The newest craze I'm seeing here at Travis goes beyond sound equipment. I'm seeing [digital video disc] players with video monitors mounted near the dashboard or in the rear passenger areas."

Also popular among off-road and four-wheel-drive owners are 2-inch to 6-inch lift kits, Howard says. Lift kits raise the vehicle's body over the suspension system for more clearance.

Bed-mounted chrome roll bars and high-output lights are popular with owners of pickups. Of questionable use for street driving, these add-ons are meant to convey the "rough-and-ready look."

Looks of a different kind are big with younger military people, who install wider custom wheels and low-profile (35-40 series) tires on their European or Japanese imports. Adjustable spring kits and shock absorbers further lower these cars to give them the look

similar to the cars in the recent movie "Fast and Furious." High-intensity quartz halogen driving lights are gaining fans, too.

In some cases, aftermarket additions and modifications go well beyond cosmetics.

"The small engines in ... [import cars] respond well to aftermarket turbochargers, camshafts, exhaust headers and modifications to the computerized fuel management system," says Marine Staff Sgt. Joseph Douglas, administration chief at Camp Pendleton's Headquarters Battalion. "These little subcompact econoboxes can be tweaked to go awfully fast."

Douglas should know. He works part time for a local speed and machine shop and builds his own cars and engines for serious street drag racing at Southern California's Carlsbad Drag Strip.

However, military auto-skills and hobby centers are more than just car clubs for the performance minded.

Auto shops help young service members learn the basics of car care, says Lanny Meekins, auto-shop duty manager at Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia Beach, Va. "I recently completed a one-year study of our auto-shop activity," he says. "I found that while 40 percent of our customers are interested in installing aftermarket equipment and modifications, 60 percent are doing routine maintenance and repairs."

"We feel an important part of our mission here is to train and encourage people to do at least basic maintenance on their cars: oil and filters, transmission and cooling system service, etc."

Meekins' study also showed the majority of his auto-shop customers are paygrades E-3 and below.

"With limited budgets for family and housing, these people usually can't afford expensive repairs or servicing at dealerships or outside shops," Meekins says. "Also, I'm seeing a yearly increase in the number of female personnel using our facilities."

Personal automobiles are an integral part of life. Whether a car owner's interest is extensive modifications or routine maintenance, base auto shops are a close, convenient and cost-effective tool. □

Dan Owen is a free-lance automotive writer in Phoenix.